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## Who Am I: Self-Knowledge According to Advaita Vedanta

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### Abstract (Summary)

This paper presents the Advaita Vedanta perspective in approaching the most fundamental question that humanity has ever asked: Who Am I? Advaita Vedanta is the non-dualistic system of Vedanta expounded primarily by an 8th century Indian philosopher called Sankara. Advaita means not two or non-dual, the One without a second. It postulates one single reality, Brahman, as the ultimate truth of the world. It then equates this reality with the sole reality of our own self, called Atman. The goal of Vedanta is to prove the reality and identity of Atman-Brahman. The purpose of this paper is to explore three questions: 1) Who am I? or What is Self-knowledge? 2) How to attain Self-knowledge? 3) How does a person established in Self-knowledge act? The second question-how to attain Self-knowledge-will be explored first and during this process the first question will get addressed on its own. The paper will conclude with some illustrations regarding how a person established in self-knowledge acts. [PUBLICATION ABSTRACT]

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### [Headnote]

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A father left a large inheritance of gold, money, land, and 17 horses to be divided as  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{1}{3}$ ,  $\frac{1}{9}$  among three children. Everything else got divided easily but they were confused how to 'divide' the horses. In desperation, they contacted an old friend of their father. He came riding in his horse and offered to add his to the herd, to make the total= 18 in all. Now they could easily divide it in  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{1}{3}$ ,  $\frac{1}{9}$ , as  $(9+6+2)= 17$ . The friend still had his horse. (Thomson, 2000, p. 282)

Our real Self is like the 18th horse in the story!

### Introduction

The term "Vedanta" literally means "end of Vedas" (the sacred books of knowledge of Hinduism). It refers, within Indian philosophical tradition, to the teachings of Upanisads, the Brahma -su tras, and the Bhagavad Gita. Advaita Vedanta is the nondualistic system of Vedanta expounded primarily by an 8th century Indian philosopher called Sankara (Deutsch, 1973). Advaita means not two, One only without a second (Ekam eva advitiyam). Advaita Vedanta postulates one single reality, Brahman, as the ultimate truth of the world. It then equates this reality with the sole reality of our individual self, called Atman. Advaita says that One alone exists, and the rest is all superimposition on that One, due to ignorance. Through a systematic inquiry into the nature of our self and the world around us, Advaita arrives at the position that the self which is of the nature of pure consciousness is constant and therefore real, while the phenomena constituting the world is constantly changing and therefore unreal. It finally concludes that, in essence, our true nature (and the nature of the universe) is 'Existence-Knowledge- Bliss' - satchitananda.

The most unique feature of advaita analysis, however, is that it takes into account all three states of our existence, avastatraya - waking, dream, and deep sleep - since we have experiences during all three states. Advaita believes that in order to obtain a complete picture of our existential reality, we need to include evidence from all three states. This is the phenomenology of consciousness according to advaita. This subject will be broached in greater detail later in this paper.

### Why search for Self- Knowledge?

That the question of self-knowledge has been explored since time immemorial attests to its perennial interest and universal value. Long before Socrates' injunction, Know Thyself, Indian seers of yore have been exploring the question of the truth in man and the universe. Self-knowledge is fundamental since all other knowledge is dependent upon this knowledge. It is important for us to know who we are so as to formulate a correct perspective in relation to other things. Without first knowing who we are, we can never understand truly where we stand in the cosmic scheme of things. In Indian philosophy, Ignorance of self (or lack of self-knowledge) is seen as the root cause of all problems in life. Due to the ignorance of our true self and consequent lack of correct valuation of things, we develop undue attachment to the objects of our desire, which becomes the cause of much of our anxiety and stress. Thus, without knowing our real nature - the truth of our existence - we can never overcome grief or find real peace.

The purpose of this paper is to explore three questions:

1. Who am I? or What is Self-knowledge?
2. How to attain Self-knowledge?
3. How does a Self-knowledgeable person act?

The second question - how to attain Selfknowledge - will be explored first and during this process the first question will be addressed en route. The paper will conclude with some illustrations regarding how a person established in selfknowledge acts.

## How to attain Self-Knowledge

### Four Qualities of a Seeker of Self-knowledge or Truth

In an opening verse of the Asthavakra Samhita, the sage Asthavakra sums up all the prerequisites to spiritual liberation as follows: "If you aspire after liberation, shun the objects of the senses as poison and seek forbearance, sincerity, kindness, contentment, and truthfulness as nectar." Like all proper systems of self-inquiry, Advaita Vedanta lays down four prerequisites or qualities for a seeker after Self-knowledge, as follows:

1. Discrimination - viveka - between the real and the unreal
2. Renunciation - vairagya - of the unreal
3. Six Virtues/Treasures - shatsampatti - of selfcontrol
4. Longing for liberation - mumukshutvam

**Discrimination.** The first quality of a seeker of self-knowledge is the ability to discriminate the real (eternal) from the unreal (non-eternal) - nityanitavastuviveka. The truth regarding all Vedantic propositions is sought on the triple basis of scripture, reasoning, and direct experience (sruti-yukti-anubhuti). The scriptures declare that all that is subject to change cannot be ultimately real and bring abiding happiness. A carefully analysis of our experience regarding the objects of our desire shows that nothing that is created is permanent or stable. Everything we desire - name, fame, wealth, and success- is subject to change and sooner or later brings grief in its wake. Thus our experience tells us that hankering after what is transitory cannot bring us lasting happiness. The more we discriminate thusly the more we realize that the true abiding joy cannot be found in transient sense objects. So, we should stop running after false goods. The practice of discrimination frees us from the bondage of ignorance and delusion.

Further analysis of our experience with obtaining the objects of our desires reveals that even when we seem to obtain happiness from the fulfillment of our desires, the real happiness actually comes from within us. Sri Krishna Menon (aka Sri Atmanada, 1973, pp. 1-2) explains this fact as follows:

Why do you seek happiness? Because the urge comes from the deepest level, your real Nature. But because your sense-organs are having outward-going tendencies, you seek that happiness in the outside world. You desire an object, you obtain it, and you get the happiness that you seek. But you have never examined where that happiness comes from. If you will allow your mind to examine it in the right manner, I am sure you will find that that happiness which you suppose you derive from sense-objects is not derived from sense objects but is your real nature.

I will prove to you how it is so: If happiness were intrinsic in sense object, it must always be giving you happiness, from babyhood up till death. But that is not your experience.... The object which gave you happiness in the childhood and when you were a young man, ceases to give you happiness when you grow old. Something else takes its place. Thus you find that happiness is not intrinsic in the senseobjects.... Likewise, if happiness were in the mind, it must be possible for you to enjoy that happiness without the help of sense-objects, but you do not get it that way. And therefore it is not residing in the mind either.

Even when we are able to satisfy our desires, the repose we get is due to the fact that it puts us in touch with our inner calm. Real Happiness is our natural state- that is why whenever we are in pain or distress, we want to get out of the pain or stress as quickly as possible and get back to our natural state of peace and comfort. Whereas when we are happy and peaceful, we do not want that state to ever end. Another proof that happiness is innate to us or lies within us is the fact that during deep sleep - devoid of the awareness of our body, mind, senses, and external possessions - we feel deeply peaceful and happy.

Thus, happiness that we seek from outside is our real nature, something intrinsic to our very being. Sri Krishna Menon (1973) goes on to explain it, thusly:

When you desire an object your mind is restless and continues to be restless until you get the desired object. When the desired object is got, mind comes to rest for the time being and you get happiness. Well, that happiness, as I have already told you, is your real Nature. It shines - or, at any rate, it is shining always, but it is taken note of - only when the mind comes to rest. Therefore it is your real nature that shines when you get a desired object (p. 3).

**Renunciation.** Once we are able to determine what is real and what is unreal, it naturally leads to dispassion about the unreal. Discrimination, therefore, is the first step and, done right, it inevitably leads to renunciation, i.e., giving up the unreal in favour of the real. As our understanding deepens through discrimination, we realize that we should not get attached to what is transient and inconstant and devote our waking hours to the cultivation of the real. As Rabbi Stephen Wise (cited in Sunirmalananda, 2005, p. 54) has put it: "Let something so high and noble come in your life that it shall be expulsive of everything low and mean." According to Advaita, Brahman or Atman alone is real, and all else is impermanent and hence unreal: The Eternal is only One, which is Brahman; everything else is impermanent (Tattvabodha, 4). As the Qur'an puts it, "Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face." (kull shay in halikun ilia w/hahu: alQisas:88)

It must be pointed out that dispassion does not mean relinquishing one's duties. As Iyer (1980, p. xix) points out: "Neglect of one's duties, on the pretext of detachment means nothing but selfishness and love of inactivity."

**Six Virtues/Treasures of Self-Control.** These virtues form the ethical foundation of spiritual life. Their practice prepares the inner faculties for the cultivation of higher knowledge (Nikhilananda, 1987, p. 34). These virtues are: (a) Sama: control of the mind; (b) Dama: control of the senses; (c) Uparati: equanimity of mind; (d) Titiksha: forbearance; (e) Samadhana, concentrating the mind on Truth; and (f) Sraddha: active faith in the teacher and scriptures (Sunirmalananda, 2005).

**Longing for Liberation.** This is the final requirement of a seeker: intense longing to be free from the bondage of ignorance and delusion by seeking self- knowledge. If this quality is missing, there is no hope for self-realization. Along with renunciation, the longing for liberation constitute the very crux of the entire spiritual aspiration. As Nikhilananda (1987, p. 36) explains: "Renunciation and the longing for freedom are the cardinal virtues through which the others bear their fruit. Without these, the mere ethical disciplines give only a veneer of spirituality."

The student must have intense longing for the liberating truth. The following story illustrates this point well:

A student approaches a teacher and declares, "I desire to learn from you." The teacher responds, "Very well, follow me." The teacher leads the student to the ocean and motions for him to follow into the water.

When they are about chest deep in the water, the teacher grabs the student and forces his head underwater. At first, the student is calm, thinking, "This is just part of some test. He will let me up in moment and I will impress him." After a minute passes, the student begins to worry and struggle. Soon, he is desperately trying to surface and becomes frantic. The teacher holds the student under the water to the point where the struggling ceases and the student almost passes out. Upon releasing him, the student angrily gasping for air shouts, "Are you crazy? You almost drowned me!"

The teacher looks calmly into his eyes and says, "When you desire to learn from me as much as you desired to get a breath, then return, and I will teach you."

When the desire for liberation is as intense as the desire of the drowning person gasping for breath, then the student is ripe to go to a teacher for initiation into the mysteries of the Self!

Thus, these four qualities prepare the seeker adequately to embark upon the august journey of self-knowledge. It is important to note that each earlier quality becomes the cause of the subsequent one: When there is proper discrimination between things real and unreal, there develops a dispassion for the unreal; dispassion helps in developing the six virtues; and dispassion, supported by these six virtues, finally leads to longing for liberation. One who has developed these four-fold prerequisites to study Vedanta is fit for learning under a qualified spiritual teacher - a guru - who is not only learned in sacred texts but also is well-established in selfknowledge (atma-nistha).

While studying under a spiritual mentor, the qualified student practices a three-fold learning discipline, starting with proper listening (sravana), supported by reflection (mañana) and contemplation (nididhyasana). This process leads the student to the experience (anubhuti) of self-knowledge in due course of time.

#### The Role and Qualities of a Guru or Spiritual Mentor

The guru is essentially a spiritual mentor guiding the disciple on the road to self-realization. The guru is a saintly person who enlightens the mind of the student by his/her very presence and by explaining the inner import of the scriptures. The Hindu tradition, perhaps more than any other, lays special emphasis on the necessity of such person. It believes that the spiritual realization, to be effective, must be communicated by a living person who is the embodiment of Truth, is well-versed in scriptures, established in the Absolute, is calm, compassionate, and self-restrained and is free from any worldly motive (Vivekachudamani, 33). It is important to note that, in Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna advises Arjuna to seek out the wise ones and reverently learn the truth from them: "Learn the Truth by humble submission, by inquiry, and by service. The Seers of Truth will teach you that Knowledge." (4:34)

Sri Ramana Maharshi has pointed out that "there is no difference between God, Guru, and the Self." According to him, "The master is both 'within' and 'without.' He gives a push from 'without' and exerts a pull from 'within'..." The real guru resides within us all: "There is only one master, and that is the Self." (Maharshi's Gospel, pp., 26-29).

The following series of questions and answers is particularly illuminating:

Questioner: What are the marks of a real teacher (sadaguru)?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Steady abidance in the Self, looking at all with an equal eye, unshakable courage at all times, in all places and circumstances. (Spiritual Instruction, p. 1)

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The sadguru (the Guru who is one with Being) is within.

Questioner: Sadguru is necessary to guide me to understand it.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The sadguru is within.

Questioner: I want a visible Guru.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: That visible Guru says that he is within. ( Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, p. 404)

#### The Method of Vedanta

The basic method employed by Vedanta to arrive at the Truth is by discriminative negation- via negativa, i.e., negating what is not real to arrive at the real. Vedanta believes that, through ignorance, we superimpose the properties of one thing to another on account of which one thing appears as another. The classic analogy that is given is that of rope-snake: In the darkness, rope appears to be a snake and seems to possess the characteristics of a snake. Elaborating along the same lines, Nikhilananda (1987, p. 42) further clarifies:

In the same manner, Vedanta contends, the attributes of the non-Self (anatama) are falsely superimposed upon the Self (Ataman). This is how the Self, which is eternal, immortal, ever pure, beyond time and space, untouched by the law of causation, and of the nature of Pure Consciousness, appears as a /iva, or phenomenal being - a physical entity subject to hunger and thirst, disease and death, and the other limitations of the relative world. Through the same inscrutable ignorance the attributes of the Self are superimposed upon the non-Self. Thus Consciousness, Intelligence, Bliss, and such other characteristics, which really belong to the Self, are falsely attributed to the non-Self, comprising the body, the senses, and the mind, all of which are by nature unconscious and inert.

The method of negation thus proceeds to eliminate, through discrimination, the falsely superimposed attributes to arrive at the true nature of a thing. For example, by negating the attributes of an illusory snake, the true nature of the rope is discovered. In the like manner, observes Nikhilananda (1987, p. 43), by negating, through discrimination, the attributes of the non-Self, one discovers the true nature of the Self, or Atman, and by negating the attributes of the relative world, the true nature of Brahman. The following verse from Avadhuta Gita sums up the method of Vedanta: By such statements as "That thou Art," your own Self is affirmed. Of that which is untrue and composed of the five elements<sup>1</sup>, the Sruti says, "Not this, not this." (1.25)

In the next section, we present three important taxonomies of Vedanta illustrating the application of the method of Vedanta in which the true nature of the Self is arrived at by negating the illusory superimpositions on it. In all these examples, the question of who we are - i.e., our ultimate reality - will be explored in three different ways.

### Five Layers of Human Personality- The Sheath Theory

Vedanta analyzes the human personality into five layers/sheaths (koshas) or levels. This scheme is known as panca-kosha-vishleshana, i.e., 'analysis of the five sheaths' and is based on the second section of the Taittiriya Upanishad. According to this theory, the fundamental Self (Atman principle), is covered by five layers or kosas (sheaths): annamayakosa (food sheath), pranamayakosa (vital air or energy sheath), manomayakosa (mental sheath), vijñānamayakosa (intellectual sheath), and anandamayakosa (bliss sheath). These sheaths are something like peels of onion growing one over the other. Accordingly, the annamayakosa is permeated by four kosas: the pranamaya and the rest. The pranamaya kosa is permeated by three kosas, the manomaya by two kosas and the vijñānamaya by one kosa. In this manner, each outer kosa is full of that which is within, i.e., the succeeding one being internal to the preceding. By resolving each kosa into that which immediately succeeds it, we are led to the knowledge of the Brahman, which is beyond cause and effect and realize our oneness with it.

The Taittiriya Upanishad speaks of a son of approaching his father with the following request: 'Adhihi bhagavo brahmeti. Sir, teach me Brahman. '(4) The father replies, ' Yato va imani bhutani /ayante; yena /atani jivanti; yatprayantyaabhisamvishantiti; tadvijijnasasva; tad brahmeti. Know That from which all beings originate, emerge; That in which all beings rest; and That into which all beings finally merge - That is Brahman.' (3.1.1) Yoga Vasishtha calls it "the substratum of all, the Self of all, and the essence of all." (Shastri, 1989, p. 107)

The son approaches his father again and tells him of his realization of Brahman as annamaya. The teacher does not say yes or no, does not give him the final answer, but encourages him to delve further and to discover for himself the deeper layers of his self. And through progressive uncovering of inner layers of pranamaya, manomaya, vijñānamaya kosas, each succeeding layer more subtler than the preceding, finally, the student realizes the Truth as anandamaya - the blissful. He then feels that there is absolute, infinite Joy, and nothing but Joy pervading the whole universe. This bliss is felt because bliss is the very nature of Brahman. This takes to the student to the final realization that this blissful reality is my own innermost being.

This section of the Taittiriya Upanishad concludes by declaring that this Brahman-realization is 'established in the supreme Space (of one's own heart), parama vyoman-pratishthita'. This is one of the most important of Vedantic doctrines: That reality which is all-pervading (Brahman) is not different from, i.e., absolutely identical with, the reality shining in one's own innermost Being-Consciousness (Atman) -Space of one's own heart. On the basis of this realization, the Seers of Upanishads were able to pronounce such great affirmations, mahavakyas, as: Tat Tavam Asi (That Thou Art); Ayam Atma Brahma (This Atman is Brahman); Pra/nanam Brahma (Consciousness is Brahman); and Aham Brahmasmi (I am Brahman). These four great statements summarize the entire teachings of the Vedas. (Nikhilananda, 1998, p. 47)

I am not my body, mind or senses

In approaching the question what am I, Advaita Vedanta starts with analyzing the reality of our body, mind, and senses. Building on the logic of netineti (not this, not this), it proceeds to negate the ultimate reality of everything in our phenomenal existence, including the reality of body, mind, intellect, and ego. As the sage Asthavakra, through a series of negations and final affirmation, clarifies to king Janaka: "You are neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor space. In order to attain liberation, know the Self as the witness of all these and as consciousness itself (1.3).

It must, however, be noted that the witness principle is not the final stage. As Sri Atmananda (1991, p. 3) clarifies: "Even the witness aspect is only a means, because even in that aspect there is superimposition. To reach Reality, this superimposition should also disappear."

In our common usage, we tend to refer to these as 'my body,' 'my mind,' and 'my intellect.' We do not say '?- body,' '?- Mind,' '?- intellect.' This is not just a linguistic contrivance or convenience but a fundamental distinction that goes to the very root of who we are. To refer to our body as "my" body" and our mind as "my mind" is to say that ? and my body/mind' are separate. This "point" or "intuiting" of separation is sometimes referred to as the awareness of "I-Amness", the awareness of our innermost being. In this regard, sage Asthavakra's advice to king Janaka is telling: "If you separate yourself from the body and mind and rest in consciousness, you will at once be happy, peaceful, and free from bondage." This is the most essential point to grasp in the journey towards selfknowledge and self-realization.

The Discrimination between "Seer" and the "Seen": Drg-Drśya Viveka

Vedanta philosophy makes a clear distinction between the "seer" (drg) and the "seen" (drśya). The "seer" (subject) is the perceiver and is of the nature of pure Consciousness or absolute Awareness. The "seen" (object) is the thing perceived and is insentient by nature. Vedanta postulates that this ignorance of the distinction between the seer (subject) and the seen (object) is the root cause of one's bondage and suffering in the world. We have become world-bound creatures on account of the identification of the seer (subject) - the "I" which is of the nature of Pure Consciousness - with the body, mind, and senses (seen objects). Nikhilananda (1987, 1998)

According to Nikhilananda (1998, p. 40; 1987. p. 45), the discrimination between the "seer" and the "seen" is, therefore, the road leading to the realization of Truth:

Following the process of inquiry laid down in Vedanta, the student realizes that all internal entities from the empirical ego to the body are only objects and the subject (Self) is the witness. Therefore, he ceases to identify himself as attached to the objects, knowing that appearance and disappearance are their inevitable nature. Similarly, by an analysis of the external world he realizes that Brahman is the only permanent entity in the universe, while names and forms are changing phenomena. Therefore, the practitioner becomes indifferent to the internal and external objects and fixes his mind on Brahman which is identical with the Self.

The existence of the Self, or Consciousness, cannot finally be doubted, because the doubter himself is the Self, or Conscious Entity. It cannot be denied, because the denier himself is the Self, or Conscious Entity. Vedanta concludes, therefore, that all entities, from the gross, tangible objects in the outside world to the mind, must be of the nature of the "seen/" the object. They are by nature insentient (jada) and changing. But the Self, or Consciousness, is the true "Seer" or Subject, unchanging Knowledge; It can never be imagined to be insentient or non-intelligent. It is Pure Consciousness, which is Atman in man and Brahman in the universe. The aim of Vedanta is to prove the reality of Atman and Brahman, and their complete identity.

Nikhilananda (1998, p. 30) recommends the following practice to remain vigilant to the distinction between the seer and the seen: "Whenever any thought appears in the mind, take it to be an object and be indifferent to it. But think of the Atman as your real nature, eternal and permanent." The key is to remain as witnessing consciousness (sakshi-chaitanya). To see oneself other than the seer is the only bondage, according to Asthavakra: "You are the one seer of all and really ever free. Verily this alone is your bondage that you see the seer as other than yourself." (1.7)

### Coordinating the three states (avastatraya) of Consciousness: Waking, Dream, and Sleep

The most unique feature of advaita analysis, as pointed out earlier, is that it takes into account all three states of our existence, avastatraya - waking, dream, and deep sleep. Generally, we tend to take the waking state to be the only true mode of our existence. Any system of thought that fails to account for all three states of consciousness cannot be taken as complete. Advaita believes that in order to obtain a complete picture of our existential reality, we need to include evidence from all three states - since we have experiences during all three states. This is a fundamental difference between the Western and Eastern modes of thinking.

Advaita Vedanta reemphasizes the ultimate unreality of body/mind complex by invoking the three states of existence. If our body/mind/intellect/ego were real, so to speak, they should remain unchanged in all states of our existence. For anything to be called really real, it has to pass the Vedantic litmus test: It has to exist unchanged in all the three states of existence. We know from our personal experience that our waking body/mind complex no longer exists during dream state or deep sleep. In the dream state, for example, we slip into the dimension of a dream body and a dream mind. And the waking/dream body and waking/dream mind cease to exist in the deep sleep. This is another very essential point to grasp in understanding our ultimate reality.

The dream state furnishes some very important data regarding our true identity. In the dream state our experiences are "internal" to the mind, as mere ideas or thoughts. Although when we are dreaming they feel every bit as real (and external) as our experiences during the waking state: for the dreamer, the dream state is the waking state! As Iyer (Scorelle, 1999) notes in his commentaries: "It will be a great error to write that the word is a dream: It is not. The correct statement is: The world is like a dream. It is because both dream and waking are mental constructs."

Sri Ramana Maharshi once said that the gist of entire Advaita Vedanta is contained in verse #170 of Shankara's masterpiece, Vivekacudamani:

In dreams, when there is no actual contact with the external world, the mind alone creates the whole universe consisting of the experiencer, the experienced, and the experience. Similarly, in the waking state also, there is no difference. Therefore, all this (phenomenal existence) is the projection of the mind (Madavananda, 2005, p. 66).

In Indian philosophy, our phenomenal existence is spoken of as illusory - like the horns of a rabbit - as manomaya, i.e., of the nature of mind, the mind-stuff. To explain this, Shankara invokes the concept of "maya" which literally means that which is not (Skt., ma=not and ya=that). Maya is the cosmic illusion - the mother of duality-on account of which one appears as many. Maya is responsible for the appearance of our variegated universe. In his famous maxim that sums up the true import of Advaita Vedanta, Shankara, masterfully puts it, thusly: Brahm satya, jagat mithya, jivo brahmo na parae. (The world is illusory. Brahman (Universal Self) is the sole reality. Individual Self (Atman) is not apart from Brahman, though.) In the first part of this mahavakya, the reality of phenomenal world is denied, the reality of Brahman is upheld, and, finally, the identity between Brahman and Atman (individual Self) is established. In other words, the world as perceived by our senses is ultimately unreal. The world is unreal not in the sense that it does not exist per se - for that will not pass the test of common sense - but unreal in the sense that it does not exist on its own, apart from Brahman, the ultimate reality. This is one good summary of Advaita Vedanta.

Let's now consider the state of dreamless sleep. Here is the crux of the Vedantic position in this regard: By what faculty one is able to recall in the morning that one slept soundly during the night? The standard Vedantic answer is that a form of witnessing-consciousness (sakshin chaitanyatma) persists through all the three states of existence and hence is the sole, ultimately Reality. By virtue of this awareness that is present even when we are deep sleep, we are able to recall in morning how well we slept during the night. This awareness remains constant and is our real nature. This awareness/consciousness, then, is the illuminating, "witness-principle" behind the façade of all the three states of our phenomenal existence; hence, it is ultimately real.

This state of pure consciousness is referred to as the Turiya (the fourth). "It is the essence of the Consciousness manifesting as the self in the three states, and it is the cessation of all phenomena. It is Peace, Bliss, and the One without a second. This is what is known as the Fourth (Turiya). This is Atman and this has to be realized." (Mandukya Upanishad, 7). Nikhilananda (1987, p. 63, 64-65) further explains:

Though the word Turiya means, literally, "fourth," yet it has no numerical significance. It is the Absolute. It is called the Fourth in relation to the three states of consciousness, namely, waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep, which belong to maya and are absent in Brahman. Turiya is the unrelated Witness of the three states.

As waves and bubbles, associated with names and forms, are seen to float on the immeasurable, serene, and homogeneous waters of the ocean, so, likewise, the experiences of the three states are seen to subsist in Turiya. As, when the illusory names and forms are discarded, the mirage is realized as the desert, the snake as the rope, and the waves and bubbles as the ocean, so, likewise, when the names and forms are discarded, every experience is regarded as Turiya, or Pure Consciousness. Turiya alone is the Reality behind all experiences, the Reality behind the universe. It is the universe in its true essence. As the unmoving and unrelated screen gives connection and continuity to the disjointed pictures in a cinema, so the attributeless, changeless, and witness-like Turiya gives connection and continuity to the disjointed experiences of the ego, in what we call our phenomenal life. Life is not possible without the substratum of Turiya, which is the Reality pervading the universe.

Fung (2004, p. 77) notes that V. S. Iyer, a pure Advaitin, had on his personal stationary a monogram illustrating the Jnana-mudra - a hand with the index finger touching the thumb, the other three fingers extended - accompanied by this verse of the Isa Upanisad: "How can there be delusion or suffering when oneness is realized." The meaning of the mudra is that one cannot know Truth if one has not mastered the analysis of the three states of consciousness, avasthatraya. As Iyer explains it, "the bent forefinger touching the thumb means that when you separately stretch out the fingers, i.e. examine the three states, there is a seer or drik which knows them, symbolized by the index finger; this is Turiya, the fourth. The touching of the forefinger with the thumb means that this fourth state is one with the Atman or Self."

Shankara captures the essence of this state in the following hymn:

The eternal Atman, which - through the

changes of waking,

dreaming, and dreamless sleep,

Through childhood, youth, maturity, and old

age -

Persists as the inexhaustible flow of conscious

ness,

Revealing Itself in the heart as the ever present

sense of "I."

~ Hymn to Sri Dakshinamurti, Nikhilananda, 1987, p. 179.

To remain constantly aware of the pulsation (Skt.: sphurana) of this witnessing-consciousness - "1-1" - is to be enlightened to our ultimate reality. According to David Godman, Sri Ramana Maharshi frequently used the Sanskrit phrase aham sphurana to indicate the ?-G consciousness or experience. Aham means I and sphurana can be translated as radiation, emanation, or pulsation' (The Mountain Path, 1991, p. 79.).

Now to know, feel, and sense - at the depth of the experiential level - the emanation of this witnessing consciousness is to become one with it, is to be it! As an Upanisadic verse puts it: Brahmavit Brahmeva Bhavati (The knower of Brahman verily becomes Brahman). In fact, one cannot really "know" it via the subject-object dichotomy, for it is the very Subject of all existence/experience, the very Ground of our being. (How can the eye "see" itself or the "ear" "hear" itself?) One can only "sense" it or "be" it! Even to say one can 'be' it is a blasphemy because how can one be what one already is. One can only realize this existential fact in the depth and silence of one's being. So, the whole effort to attain the real is seen as unnecessary - like legging the snake - when in fact we are that Reality all along.

As Sri Ramana Maharshi put it so eloquently:

There is no greater mystery than this, that we keep seeking reality though in fact we are reality. We think that there is something hiding reality and that this must be destroyed before reality is gained. How ridiculous! A day will dawn when you will laugh at all your past efforts. That which will be on the day you laugh is also here and now. Realization is getting rid of the delusion that you haven't realized. (Talks with Ramana Maharshi, 2000, p. 132)

Sri Ramana's recurring advice to all seekers: "Be as you are."

Our acquisitive mind, however, wants to know: What can I do to arrive at this state of unmixed, unshakable bliss. Are there any steps to follow? Any recipes? Are there any guidelines? This is one of the great paradoxes of spiritual search: there is nothing one can do to induce this blissful state of being. The seers and sages of all times have always hinted at this subtle point: how could the ego which itself is unreal (an illusion) can ever "do" anything to attain what is real? If one sees the ridiculousness of trying to seek light with the help of darkness, one can be liberated on the spot! However, out of their inexhaustible compassion and generosity, the seers and sages have recommended some practices that lead to the understanding of this paradox, and, hence, may lead to the ending of the very search itself. UG Krishnamurti's non-teachings hammer at this paradox constantly.

How does one established in Self-Knowledge act?

Liberation from the bondage of ignorance is the supreme goal of Vedantic quest. The seeker cuts asunder this beginning-less ignorance with the sword of Self-knowledge. As is clear from the foregoing, the direct knowledge of Self or Atman is the means to the realization of liberation. By steady abidance in the Self, one becomes free from grief and suffering. Says Chandogya Upanisad: tarati sokam atmavit. 'The knower of Self goes beyond grief (7.1.3). For how can there be delusion or suffering when oneness is realized: To him who sees unity, what delusion is there, what grief? (Isa Upanisad, 7). Free from the motives of personal gain or loss, the Self-realized person acts with the intention of doing good to the world. In the words of Bhagavad Gita, such a person is "most actively engaged in seeking the welfare of all beings" (sarva bhuta hite ratah - 5.25; 12.4). In Vedantic parlance, such a person is called /ivanmukta, liberated-in-life. Unattached, he remains a silent witnessing consciousness (sakshin-chaitanyam) or seer to all the actions of the body-mind complex.

It is important to recall that Self is the ultimate seer - self-consciousness at the back of - of body, mind, and senses because no other seer is known to exist. To look for the seer of the Self would be "to end in what is known as a regressus ad infinitum " (Nikhilananda, 1998, p. 2). In the words of Bhagavad Gita, "That exists enveloping all" (13.13). And 'when attachment and other passions are purged from the heart, the realization by the Self of its own nature is attained without any effort.' (Shankara's commentary on verse 18.66 of Bhagavad Gita, Sastry, 1995, p. 503).

Such a person has achieved complete freedom from the shackles of egoism, i.e., from the sense of doership. In the following verse, Ashtavakra analyzes the malady of egoism as well as prescribes the medicine: "Do you who have been bitten by the great black serpent of egoism ? am the doer, drink the nectar of the faith ? am not the doer, and be happy." (1.8) The Bhagavad Gita has this to say on the topic on non-doership:

The knower of Truth, (being) centered (in the Self) should think, "I do nothing at all" - though seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, going, sleeping, breathing, speaking, letting go, holding, opening and closing the eyes - convinced that it is the senses that move among sense-objects. (V. 8-9)

The gunas (qualities) of Nature perform all work. One whose mind is deluded by egoism thinks, "I am the doer" (III. 27).

But, one, with true insight into the domains of gunas and action, knowing that gunas as senses merely acting on gunas as objects, does not become attached. (III. 28)

If all work is performed by gunas (qualities) of nature- senses moving through sense-objects - then what freedom does one have? In this context, Sri Ramana Maharshi's response is particularly illuminating: "All the actions the body is destined to perform are already decided upon at the time it comes into existence: the only freedom you have is whether or not to identify yourself with the body? (Osborne, 2002, p. 42; emphasis added). It is important to remember that the body- identification is due to ignorance and with the dawning of the Selfknowledge, this identification disappears and one realizes oneself as formless, pure Consciousness and as the essence of the whole universe. As Sruti says, "With the disappearance of the attachment to the body and with the realization of the Supreme Self, to whatever object the mind is directed one experiences Samadhi?

Nikhilananda (1998, p. 35) cites Yoga Vashishtha to describe the nature of the samadhi when one has become free from all thoughts or ideas and has been filled with Supreme Bliss: "It is just like an empty pitcher placed in the sky, having nothing inside or outside; and again, it is just like a full pitcher placed in the sea, full of (water) both inside and outside."

The knower of self sees the Self in everything and everything in the Self (sarvabhutstham atmaanam sarvabhutani ca atmani ikshtey. Bhagavad Gita, 6.29). As Iyer points out in his commentaries (Scorelle, 1999): "Non-duality does not mean the non-existence of a second thing, but its nonexistence as other than yourself. The mind must know that it is of the same substance as the objects." This state is described in the Avadhuta Gita as follows: 'All is verily the Self alone' (sarvam atmaiva kevalam- 1.15) and 'All is verily Brahman alone' (brahmaiva kevalam sarvam - 1.45).

To conclude this part, here is the clearest description of one abiding in the wisdom of the Self: "Resting in Brahman, with intellect steady and without delusion, the knower of Brahman neither rejoices in receiving what is pleasant nor grieves on receiving what is unpleasant." (Bhagavad Gita, V. 20)

#### Concluding Thoughts

In a key upanisadic passage, a seeker approaches a sage with the question: Kasminnu bhagavo vi/nate sarvamidam vijñatam bhavatP. - Revered sir, what is it, by knowing which everything becomes known? (Mundaka Upanishad, 1.1.3.) Through the process of neti, neti - not this, not this - the seeker is led first to the Brahman (the reality of the universe) and finally to the Atman (the reality of our own Self). Just as by knowing clay everything that is made of clay becomes known, similarly Brahman-Atman is that Essence/Ground/Substratum by knowing which everything else becomes known. However, for this to be possible, one need to go beyond physical level and enter into the realm of pure Consciousness.

In the words of Avadhuta Gita: Song of the Free (1.5): "The essence and the whole message of Vedanta is this Knowledge, this supreme Knowledge: that / am by nature the formless, allpervasive Self." The final message of Vedanta, then, is this: "Know who you are. Know that you are Pure Consciousness and Absolute Awareness, and be free!" To know oneself as absolute awareness is to be established in Self-knowledge.

#### [Footnote]

1 Five elements - earth, water, fire, air, fire, and space. These elements, according to Indian philosophy, constitute the whole phenomenal existence.

2 Sruti - literally means "hearing" - refer to sacred texts of Hinduism, divinely revealed to ancient seers when they were absorbed in a deep meditation.

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